A few years ago a friend of mine received a letter from an Irish government agency. Although he’s an Irish-Australian dual national, he couldn’t understand why he’d received the letter, as he’s never lived in Ireland. The letter was generic and vague. If he believed he’d experienced child abuse in an Irish institution, it said, he may be entitled to compensation. If he wanted to apply for compensation, he should fill out the enclosed form, return it to the agency, and his application would be considered. No context was provided. No statutory declaration was required. No judicial process was mentioned. He decided the letter had something to do with the Ryan Commission, which had recently issued its report, but that didn’t explain why he’d received it, as he’d never been in an Irish institution or experienced child abuse.

Who decided he should receive the letter? What were the criteria? Why was it generic and vague? What were its unspoken assumptions? While it would be easy to dismiss this as an Irish idiosyncrasy, it does raise questions about how different countries respond to the issue of child abuse in institutions. Ireland is unique and its experience doesn’t apply everywhere else. Australia has the opportunity to respond to the issue, with the announcement of a royal commission, but a lot depends on its terms of reference: whether they are about policy, governance or redress; how they define child abuse; how they define an institution; why they include some institutions and exclude others. Will the secular education system receive the same scrutiny as the religious education system? Will state custodial agencies receive the same scrutiny as religious custodial agencies? Will the Scouts and Guides receive the same scrutiny as religious fellowships?

Whenever and wherever it occurs, child abuse is a serious and complex issue. Unfortunately, the commentariat reports it in a way that, in the public mind, links it predominantly with the Catholic Church, as if that’s the principal institution with a case to answer; as if Ireland and Australia are the same. This is a wicked thing for the commentariat to do, as it makes the Catholic Church a scapegoat for a broad range of anti-Catholic prejudices. Of course, many of these prejudices are also held by Catholics themselves, practising and lapsed, who think that undermining their church is striking a blow for the forces of good, instead of what it really is: participating in a mischief that could quickly slide into evil, much like the French Revolution quickly elided into the Reign of Terror.

As far as child abuse is concerned, what are the facts and the truth? The royal commission needs to establish these and stick to the evidence. Unfortunately, many individuals and lobby groups aren’t interested in the evidence as their minds are already made up. This is understandable, given human nature, but the tendency to prejudge, and to behave in an opportunistic way, is harder to accept in those professionals whose careers depend upon evidence. It’s obvious there are lawyers and scientists who adhere to the forensic method in their public lives but privately believe erroneous things about Catholics. Likewise, there are epidemiologists and statisticians who would never dream of drawing wrong conclusions from their data but disguise what can only be described as atavistic prejudices against Catholics. It’s hard not to feel danger looming, when listening to such people as they bounce back and forth between rationality and irrationality.

From a methodological perspective, we can assume that at least some of the evidence collected by or presented to the royal commission will be problematic. There is likely to be little quantitative evidence. There is likely to be much qualitative evidence from individuals with agendas, lobby groups pressuring cases, and lawyers seeking compensation. There will be attempts to package non-scientific and qualitative information in a way that makes it appear scientific and quantitative. While one hopes the royal commissioners will be aware of this tendency, and will compensate for it as best they can,

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the absence of scientific and quantitative evidence is unfortunate.

One indisputable fact about child abuse falls outside the royal commission’s terms of reference. The overwhelming majority of abuse occurs outside institutions and is perpetrated by family members. To put this in its starkest terms, a child is safer with a diocesan priest, or a member of a religious order, than it is with its relatives. As the royal commission will be limited by its terms of reference to institutional abuse, one wonders whether it really has been constituted to address the issue of child abuse in a meaningful way or whether it is about reforming institutions: some more than others. That brings us to the inevitable perception that the terms of reference will be weighted against the Catholic Church and will be aimed at either undermining its polity, or remaking it in society’s image, according to a range of secular and religious agendas.

Since the French Revolution, there have been many state-sponsored attempts to destroy Christianity in Europe, the Soviet Union, Mexico, and elsewhere. While we live in twenty-first-century Australia, let’s not be fooled; many Australians have ulterior motives for manufacturing and promoting the myth of the church in crisis. There are several overlapping dynamics here: anti-Christian, anti-Catholic, secular, and religious. There’s also a coalition of strange bedfellows, the most sinister of whom are busily convincing the commentator that they have pure motives and occupy the moral high ground. They tell us they worry about the church’s crisis of authority, and the failure of its moral compass, but their real agendas are hidden. They play on popular prejudices and speak from a predictable script. Their weak points are a lack of methodological rigour and an absence of quantifiable evidence concerning prevalence.

Whenever the issue of child abuse is discussed, several widely held and popular assumptions come into play: there’s more abuse in religious institutions than secular institutions; believers are more likely to abuse than non-believers; Catholics are more likely to abuse than non-Catholics; single clergy are more likely to abuse than married clergy; celibates are more likely to abuse than non-celibates; homosexuals are more likely to abuse than heterosexuals; abolishing celibacy, and allowing priests to get married, will solve the problem; the Catholic Church is out of touch and only interested in preserving its male hierarchy and historical power; not only do other Christian denominations experience less abuse, they have also dealt with their abuse better than Catholics have. As far as the royal commission is concerned, these popular assumptions will remain problematic unless it has quantifiable evidence to prove them.

Are these assumptions quantifiable? They must be. It’s hard to believe that twenty-first-century Australia doesn’t have the research capacity, or the funding, or the social and political will, to turn these assumptions into study questions and test them in an objective and methodologically sound way. It’s hard to believe that there isn’t sufficient data among the churches, faiths and all custodial institutions whether secular or religious, to justify a research program that measures the prevalence of child abuse, within settings and across settings, in the same way that other kinds of prevalence are measured.

In Australia, why have other churches, faiths and custodial institutions remained relatively silent on the issue of child abuse and allowed the Catholic Church to bear the full brunt of commentariat speculation and popular prejudice? Is it because Catholics are different from everyone else and have a special case to answer? Is it because all churches, faiths and custodial institutions are culpable and there is no moral high ground to occupy? Until we have quantifiable evidence to demonstrate otherwise, should we assume that all churches, faiths and custodial institutions have managed child abuse in a similar way: by moving perpetrators to other settings where they could become repeat offenders; by taking a corporate or legalistic approach; by failing in their duty of care to victims; by not responding in what we now understand to be a pastorally appropriate manner; by failing to follow statutory guidelines which, let’s be honest, have only appeared in the last few years?

In John’s Gospel, Jesus says: “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” In spite of its human failings and historical sins, and every attempt to persecute and destroy it, the church shouldn’t fear the royal commission, regardless of its terms of reference. Its real enemies are elsewhere.

Dr Michael Giffin is a priest in the Anglican diocese of Sydney.